



Shannon captures vibrant, joyous life

by John Dorsey, October 8, 1997

Joe Shannon's realist paintings at Maryland Art Place bellow, boom, pound and sing with life -- and it's our life, every bit of it. His big, vibrant canvases, crowded with people and references to art and myth, capture a lot of what we are, what we'd like to be and what we fear.

Shannon lives outside of Washington and teaches at the Maryland Institute, College of Art. He enjoys his biggest show ever with the 11 big, crowded canvases that lie in wait to jolt viewers out of any lethargy they might have brought with them. They resemble staged scenes in which the actors assume attitudes sometimes uncomfortably familiar. And they encourage convention-busting in a way that recalls Auntie Mame's famous line: "Live! Live! Live! Life is a banquet, and most poor suckers are starving to death."

Shannon's scenes are set in the milieu of the arts -- specifically the worlds of dance and more often (and tellingly) the fine arts gallery. Into these settings he introduces the artist and the curator, the gallery-goer and the person who seems to have wandered in by chance. In each of these pictures, we are going to find ourselves at least once and maybe more.

In "The City and the Country: The Reception" we see an art opening. People milling about among the gallery's paintings and sculptures of male and female nudes register all manner of reactions. There's the guy who tries not to show he's turned on by this stuff, but you can tell anyway. There's the woman only too willing to show her shock and horror, which looks as if it has an element of fakery in it. There's the fellow who looks as if he doesn't know what to make of the art but doesn't want to ask anything for fear of making a fool of himself. And there's the priceless woman in the foreground who doesn't approve but doesn't want to look unsophisticated, either, so she's going to be uncomfortable in silence.

And out the window there's an Arcadian or hedonistic scene, depending on your point of view, with a nude guy riding a horse and a half-nude guy (representing the artist) gamboling with a woman in schoolgirl clothes.

This painting is, in part, about hypocrisy -- the face we show to the world and what's behind it. But it's not done in a nasty or superior way. It's a boldly colored, bright, good-humored painting that says: "Come on, now, you know this is what it's like behind the masks. Loosen up a little and join the fun."

If Shannon's style is realism, his tone is optimism, even idealism. In the largest painting here, "Merryman: A Dance Life (Human Affection)," the artist crowds 19 figures into his 12-foot-long canvas. Races, generations and types mingle in harmony. A statue of Orpheus singing in the foreground (reminiscent of the Orpheus statue to Francis Scott Key at Fort McHenry) unites the group, his gesture echoed by the figure of the artist in the background, holding a tambourine instead of a lyre. Here, as elsewhere, Shannon indicates that life would be a little better if we all faced up to what we really are and got rid of some of our prejudices and inhibitions.

These paintings aren't entirely consistent. The two dance-themed ones fall short of the art-themed ones. But taken together, they represent not so much a breath as a breeze of fresh air.

And look for familiar works of art in the background. Can you find the Baltimore Museum of Art's Jasper Johns painting?

Downstairs at MAP, the paintings and drawings of Manon Cleary share with Shannon's a degree of realism and references to art history -- Pompeiian wall paintings and the bones that fascinated Georgia O'Keeffe. She is accomplished both as painter and draftsman, as her "Mystery Series" paintings and "Man in a Plastic Bag" drawings demonstrate. The small paintings of the "Rape" series possess considerable power at first, but repetition unfortunately dulls the effect.

MAP

What: Paintings by Joe Shannon and Manon Cleary

Where: Maryland Art Place, 218 W. Saratoga St.

When: 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesdays through Saturdays, through Nov. 8

Call: 410-962-8565

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